

# New Aggies Elevated Program at USU Eastern Celebrates Its First Graduating Class

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Left to right: Michelle McKnight, executive director; Jonas Cowley, 2024 graduate; Liz Dimond, director of Aggies Elevated at USU Eastern; Gabrielle Comstock, 2024 graduate; and Tom Higbee, head of the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling at USU.

In 2021, Aggies Elevated, a USU post-secondary education program for students with intellectual disabilities, began offering its program to students at USU Eastern in Price, Utah. The program is housed in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling (SPERC) within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. The first cohort of students from the Aggies Elevated program in Price graduated in May 2024.

“It is so exciting to see the students launch into their next phase of adulthood armed with skills and experiences that make their dreams so much more attainable,” said Liz Dimond, director of Aggies Elevated at USU Eastern. “My hope is that each graduate will continue to learn and grow as they pursue their goals and take on new challenges. The growth and development that occurs in just a few short semesters is remarkable.”

The mission of Aggies Elevated, which began 11 years ago on the Logan campus, is to empower students to become resilient problem-solvers and self-determined citizens. Aggies Elevated students participate in campus and school life along with all other students. Michelle McKnight, executive director of Aggies Elevated and

professor in SPERC, emphasizes the inherent value in the program for everyone on campus.

“Inclusion at USU benefits everybody, not just our group of students in Aggies Elevated. It benefits faculty who have interactions with students who are different from their norm so they have to think about how to teach in a different way. It benefits students who have never interacted with a person with an intellectual disability. That student may go on to be an employer and will be able to say how capable people with intellectual disabilities are.”

Three years ago, when the Aggies Elevated program expanded to the USU Eastern campus, administrators saw many benefits to the second location. “USU Eastern is home to an incredible technical education department. Aggies Elevated students can concurrently pursue their certificate as well as a wide variety of technical education credentials,” says Dimond. Additionally, aspects like affordability and accessibility (students can get to every class and access all their resources within about a two-block radius) attract students to the Price location.

The capacity of the Aggies Elevated program has also doubled. Now, between the two locations, Aggies Elevated accepts between 10 and 14 students each year. “Our admissions process is very modified,” McKnight explains. “We care more about motivation, behavior, and personal characteristics than we care about high school GPAs and SAT scores.”

Due to the support the students need, first-year Aggies Elevated students come to USU prior to the semester beginning for an extensive orientation. “We have base camp before classes start in the Fall because we need to do a lot of life-skills training,” explains McKnight. “We show them how to get around campus, how to use their card at the cafeteria, how to get to their dorm.”

Once classes start, Aggies Elevated students are assigned peer mentors who spend two hours every weekday with them. Together, they may choose to work on homework or participate in a variety of everyday experiences that provide the student with necessary life skills. “We want them to learn how to ride the bus to Walmart, fill a prescription at Smiths, even go to a coffee shop in the Huntsman building,” says McKnight.

Between the two campuses, the Aggies Elevated classes are delivered via video broadcast across the university’s internal system so all students in the same cohort, regardless of location, attend program classes that are focused on lifelong learning, independent living, community involvement, self-advocacy, and career

development. In addition, students enroll in one or two classes each semester from the many offerings at the university. Aggies Elevated students are fully integrated in these university classes, with requirements adapted as needed to fit their specific abilities.

At the completion of the two-year program, Aggies Elevated students earn a certificate of Integrated College and Community Studies. The program's goal for graduates is full community inclusion and independent living to each student's highest ability. It also prepares students for competitive jobs in the marketplace. Some students even opt to complete an associate's degree by staying another year to fulfill the requirements.

"It is amazingly fun to see how far the students come beyond the academics—like emotional regulation, independent living, and communication skills," says McKnight. "I love Aggies Elevated. It feels like it is exactly what I'm supposed to be doing."

"The students in the program and the peer mentors I supervise and train are the best part of the program," says Dimond. "When the paperwork, red tape, and administrative duties start bogging me down, I just go spend a few minutes with them and recharge. It is remarkable to watch these young pioneers pave the way for high expectations and fair opportunities."

Learn more about [Aggies Elevated](#).